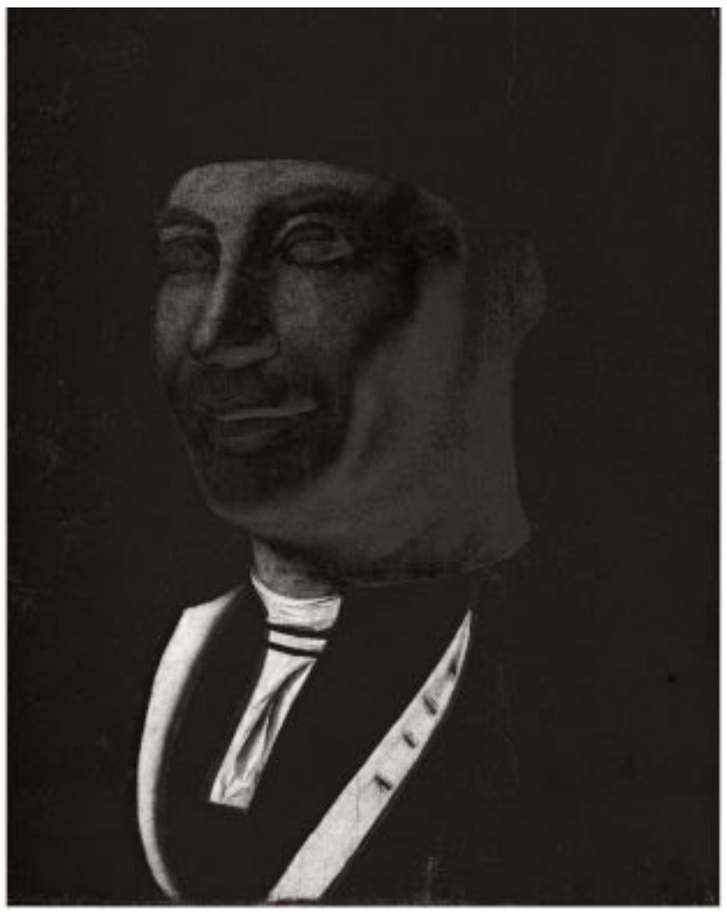

US Italia Weekly

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Da Messina, the Master Who Shaped Italian Renaissance Art

Antonello's "Living" Portraits

(byLynne Lawner, continued from p.1)

Cultural Commissioner for the Sicilian Region, a key figure in the complex process of arranging for these rare works to be brought to New York City: only seven, he sighed.

Several great works by Antonello are on view, the most famous one being the striking, somewhat uncanny "Virgin Annunciate" placed on the far wall as you come from the top of the great stairway though the European galleries. Undoubtedly the idea was that it would catch the eye upon entering, but that the viewer could proceed towards it at a slow pace, absorbing other experiences, thus prepared for its spell-like captivation.

Equally compelling in its own way is the "Christ Crowned with Thorns," also known as "Ecce Homo" on the left wall, property of the Metropolitan and a theme on which Antonello produced several important variations. Gazing at the vulnerably naked torso with its pallor below the age-weary face revealing its knowledge of suffering, we are being invited to participate directly in sorrow. Such empathetic religious portraits are meant to be experienced. This one is noteworthy for its pathetic directness, the absence of the rope usually around the Savior's neck, and the parapet that divides the figure fatally from us and yet allows us to contemplate him against a black background. Individualistic, the opposite of hieratic, the portrait with its parted lips and thick nose reveals the clear influence of Netherlandish painting.

There are two double-sided portable panels with "Ecce Homo" on one side and scenes on the other: one has a "St. Jerome in the Desert," the other "Madonna and Child with A Praying Franciscan Donor." "Behold the Man," Pilate declared in John 19:5. Pilate is often shown with the thorn-crowned Christ, but Antonello is drawn to the essential embodied in the single portrayed personage.

In this show there are two superb male portraits—a jolly redhead with a cap whose smile has been compared to that of a Greek "kouros" and another smiling fellow once used as a cupboard door on Lipari Island and thought to be a sailor. On that score, famed art historian and critic Roberto Longhi dryly commented: "Antonello painted Barons, not fishermen." The first portrait is in the Met's collection, the second has come from Cefalu.

Characteristic of all Antonello's works including his human portraiture is a fusion of grandeur of conception, observation of detail, and solid Renaissance construction and perspective absorbed from studying Central Italian masters such as Piero della Francesca. "His artistic progression is truly breathtaking and transports us from the backwater of Hispano-Netherlandish devotional paintings…to some of the most cosmopolitan and exquisite examples of naturalistic description in European art," notes Keith Christiansen in his fine catalogue essay, "The Exalted Art of Antonello da Messina." The small but cogent catalogue from Yale University Press was written by Gioacchino Barbera, with contributions by Keith Christiansen and Andrea Bayer.

"Portrait of a Man" by Antonello da Messina.

The Virgin being announced to or perhaps (as I like to speculate) announcing, has been represented in that famous "Annunciate" from Palermo without the traditional Angel Gabriel. It is a work still surrounded with an aura of quiet mystery. She faces the viewer, with one hand gripping the simple woolen blue garment thrown over upper body and head. Her right hand is raised, extended somewhat towards us above a wooden lectern. For Christiansen, she is blessing the private patron who would have made his devotions to her once or twice daily. I prefer to think that she is, indeed, responding to the absent angel. Certainly this is an image of stupor mixed with calm. A girl in her early teens has just looked up from her book. Something is occurring to her (in both senses of the word) that is also happening in the cosmos.

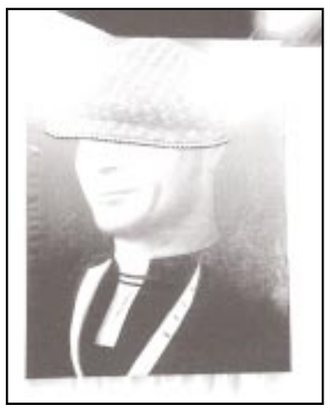
Antonello's Virgin, a girl of the people only seemingly "deprived" of her angel, could also be seen as alarmed by a revelation, while already in the process of resolving that alarm. But, in truth, how many impressions each of us has of that single work, from far and from near! Eventually, we come to divine her mood of sweet acceptance, alive in an incipient smile. Nevertheless, the raised hand might also be gently warding us off, we profane ones, in a vaguely "noli me tangere" gesture of iconic apotropaism. In short, the Virgin protects what she knows not; it is there and is happening.

Because of her simplicity, this Virgin is related to the many Madonnas of Humility, a traditional pose of the Madonna seated with her child on a low bench, often made of stone, alluding to the sarcophagus from which her murdered son will rise, or else, seated directly on the ground. A similar, if prescient, humility invests this image, conveyed principally in inward, deeply psychological terms. Purity and humility ineffably blend in this moment or phase when consciousness, as well as the baby seeded within her are beginning to grow.

Another, earlier "Annunciate" in Munich represented here by a photograph, relates tellingly to the more beautiful, later one on display, as well as to the almost offensively physical "Ecce Homo" works. This "Annunciate" shows once more the Virgin strategically deprived of her angel, staring out toward us, possibly gesturing towards us. But this far more hapless Virgin for which the same female model posed garbed in the same blue garment is homely, her mouth awkwardly open in a nearly distorted expression. About to be impregnated by the Word, can she be seen as a kind of "Ecce Mulier" as an ultimately tragic role is handed to her?

This extraordinary exhibition is being sponsored by the Foundation for Italian Art and Culture, Bulgari, the Region of Sicily and the ACP Group.

The Coppola? It's Positively Cool



A painting by Baldo Diodato.

At the splendid former synagogue in New York's Lower East Side that is home to the Orensanz Foundation, there was a fashion show with a distinctly Sicilian flavor. Male and female models sported the island's traditional headware, the "coppola," designed by the young Sicilian designer, Tindara Agnello. A couple of blocks away another space was inaugurated dedicated to the cap at the Clayton Gallery (161 Essex Street), where until December 31 you can find at least fifty prototypes of the coppola interpreted by famous artists, in addition to paintings by Baldo Diodato based on Antonello da Messina's famous portrait.

Is the coppola making a comeback? An enthusiastic "Yes!" is the answer of Guido Agnello, father of Tindara and chairman of the Palazzo Intelligente Foundation. "More and more American college students are casting aside their baseball caps in favor of what for too many years was considered a symbol of the mafia." His foundation is promoting a fresh new image of Sicily through a series of initiatives, including the rediscovery of the coppola as an instrument of cultural and social reawakening. The town of San Giuseppe Jato in Sicily, once sadly associated with a prominent mafia family, is today a major exporter of the cap. At the "Sangiuseppe s.p.a." factory, the workers are all women, proud to bring home an honest paycheck, keep alive a local tradition, and send it out into the world. One year ago the retailer that make their product available to consumers, "La Coppola Storta," opened up a store in New York on 246 Mott Street. **L.A.**

Sicilian Mystery

Where in the World is Caravaggio's Stolen "Nativity?"

by Charles Sabba

An Italian tough guy was sitting at a table in Rome when he was insulted by a waiter. In defense of his honor, he impulsively threw a plate of artichokes in the waiters face. Later, this street guy, who had a long police rap sheet, gets into an argument over a game in Naples. He kills his opponent, flees south to Malta and is inducted into the Military Order of St. John. He gets into trouble with this group of very dangerous men and flees to Sicily in fear for his life. This is the volatile, violent nature of the Lombardy artist named Michelangelo Merisi di Caravaggio. The artist's violent life no doubt has parallels to the lives of the men who stole the Nativity 360 years later from the Oratorio di San Lorenzo in Palermo, Sicily.

October 19, 1969 was a stormy evening in Palermo. Thieves prefer to commit burglaries during storms because they are less likely to be seen or heard by people walking outside. According to a mafia pentito [literally, "penitent", it is an Italian journalistic term for those who claim to renounce their lives of crime in the mafia to cooperate with the law] named Francesco Marino Mannoia, he and some accomplices entered the Oratorio and stole the painting. In sworn testimony at the trial of former Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, Mannoia claims that they irreparably damaged the 8 foot by 6 foot canvas while cutting it from its frame and then folding it up. Mannoia stated that the painting was being stolen for Andreotti, a claim the former premier denied. [Andreotti had to defend himself in court against mafia complicity charges for over ten years and was finally acquitted]. Many art lovers still believe (or want to believe) that the painting still exists and can be recovered one day.

Senior Special Agent Robert Wittman of the F.B.I. stated, "We put the stolen Caravaggio on our top ten most wanted stolen art list. We want that painting back. We want to work closely in international cooperation with the Italian Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale. We have the utmost respect of the talents and dedication of the T.P.C."

"Nativity" by Caravaggio, which disappeared in 1969.

Agent Wittman heads the F.B.I.'s newly established Art Crime Team. This team is made up of ten agents and supported by two Special Trial Attorneys for prosecutions. With the creation of this specialized unit, the F.B.I. has declared to the world that the U.S. is dedicated to protecting the world's cultural property. They have recently released a list of their top ten art crimes which, besides the Caravaggio, includes Cellini's Saliera, DaVinci's Madonna of the Yarnwinder, Munch's The Scream, and looted and stolen artifacts from Iraq (for more info on this unit refer to: www.fbi.gov/hq/cid/arttheft/arttheft.htm).

Art theft is a huge international problem. While in the U.S., most thefts of art are from private residences, in Europe, churches are the most vulnerable targets. The churches there are old and rich in cultural treasures. Unlike the churches in the U.S. that only unlock their doors when mass is being celebrated, the church doors in Italy stay open to allow the public free access. The Oratorio di San Lorenzo was repeatedly plundered after the 1969 theft of the Nativity. It has lost a 16th century painting of the crucifixion, a 17th century wooden Madonna, and its carved and gilded wooden choir stalls, to name just a few. The Oratorio was built in 1569 near the church of San Francesco d'Assisi. The inside was richly decorated by Giacomo Serpotto. This extraordinarily beautiful stucco work, which comprises statues, reliefs and putti, is considered his masterwork.

Recovering art work years after it has been stolen is not uncommon (most stolen works do not resurface before 15 years or more), especially in a culture of the "old tradition" where keeping silent is itself finetuned to an art, where a man's ability to maintain silence defines his manhood.

The "old school" mafiosi would rather die in prison then break omertà, the code of silence they lived by. Men like them were raised in omertà, which is more than a code of silence, it is a mental state of mind and a philosophy of life that gives meaning to their existence. They adhere to the belief that real men keep silent, from the minute details of home and family life, to the intricate workings of their cosche [clans]. The secret, mysterious nature of the players on this particular game board makes the next move all the more intriguing.

One of the biggest problems (unique to Sicily) the Italian authorities face in recovering this painting is not the value of the piece, it is the unwillingness of any one involved in talking with authorities. It would be impossible to get those old timers, who are probably few in number today and, who have any knowledge of the painting's fate, to utter one word about the painting's whereabouts. The old timers strictly adhere to their beliefs. For these guys discussing secrets is comparable to committing mortal sin. After the Mafia wars of the 1980s, it is very likely that the people who had knowledge of the paintings hiding place are either dead or in prison. It may be stashed in an obscure corner of an old house or wine cellar waiting to be discovered, possibly by someone who wouldn't have the foggiest idea what they were holding.

Sicilians are proud of the rich artistic and cultural heritage that belongs to them, their children, and their grand-children. The children who pray in San Lorenzo deserve to gaze at the Nativity's beauty. The statutes of limitations in this crime have all expired; no one can be prosecuted or held accountable. We hope for our Christmas miracle.

Charles Sabba is a police officer and forensic artist specialized in art and antiques crime investigations.

New York Public Library Event

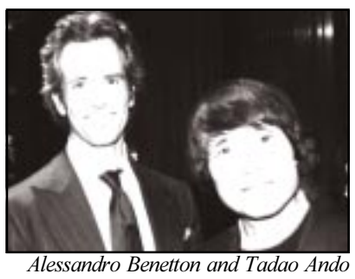
Benetton and His Architect

by Gaia Torzini

The Storefront for Art and Architecture could not have chosen a more suitable space for a public talk on December 14 between Alessandro Benetton and the Japanese architect Tadao Ando than the warm, quiet, welcoming in the New York Public Library: a space neither too big nor too small, elegantly decorated and softly lit. An environment that conveys better than words the philosophy at the foundation of Tadao Ando's works, including the "Invisible House" at Ponzano, Treviso, where Alessandro Benetton, vice chairman of Benetton Group, lives with his family.

"Buildings are made for the living beings who inhabit them, be they humans or animals," began the Japanese architect, as he projected an image of his dog in his Osaka studio. Born in that city in 1941, and self-taught, Mr. Ando went on to review his career, from his training to his collaboration with the Benetton Group. In ironic tones, he recalled the Japanese and European structures that most impressed him, as well as the difficulties he faced having his ideas accepted in traditionalist Japan. It is a story rich in anecdotes, such as the one about his early dream (still unrealized) of designing roof gardens as public space in cities. "Whenever I would propose this to architects, they would always say: it's a nice idea. But you're still too young. Propose it again in a while and maybe we'll take you up on it."

In 1992, Luciano Benetton invited him to work in the Fabrica, Benetton's communications research center in Ponzano, where young people from different countries interested in multiple disciplines work together. And



Alessandro Benetton and Tadao Ando

immediately after that, Mr. Benetton's son, Alessandro, commissioned him to restructure a Palladian villa that has become his "Invisible House," so-called because it is surrounded by trees. The work succeeded largely due to the excellent collaboration between client and architect. "When we first met," explained Alessandro, "my own concern was that Palladio's preexisting structure be respected. And I was clear in what I asked for, "a lot of privacy and a lot of light." "Collaboration and dialogue with the client is fundamental," chimed in Mr. Ando, "as much as collaboration between the people working on a project. Architecture is not an individualistic art."

The talk between Mr. Ando and Mr. Benetton (which was moderated by Mark Wigley, Dean of the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University) is the first in a series of discussions organized by the Storefront for Art and Architecture (an internationally recognized non-profit organization) to discuss the relationship between recognized architects and their clients. The conversation was also inspired by the book Architecture for Benetton, written by Massimo Vignelli, Antonia Muulas and Marco Mulazzani and published by Skira. In addition to Mr. Ando's projects, it documents Benetton collaborations with Afra and Tobia Scarpa.